RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

May 2008

Socio-economic Series 08-011

Understanding the Status of Visitability in Canada

INTRODUCTION

"Visitability" is an affordable and sustainable design strategy aimed at increasing the number of basic-access family homes and neighbourhoods. "Visitable housing" is the design of houses with:

- a no-step entrance;
- wider doors;
- a bathroom on the main floor.

With these three main features, a house can be more functional and safer. It is easier to maintain, easier to move furniture in and out of, easier to get into and out of with a baby carriage, bicycle or cart; easier to have older friends and relatives visit; and an easier living place for people with a mobility impairment.

Visitable design is increasing in importance as the baby boomer population ages. People are in the market for homes and neighbourhoods that are more livable; however, there is very little visitable housing stock available in Canada.

The North American visitability movement began in the late 1980s with the dual goals of ensuring access by people with mobility impairments to their neighbours' homes and providing a basic "shell" of access to permit people to remain in their own homes if they develop a disability. Visitability doesn't offer total access, but does allow people with disabilities to enter the first floor of a home without being lifted up, and provides access to the rooms and bathrooms on the first floor. There have been several visitability initiatives in the U.S.A., Great Britain and Australia.

BACKGROUND

With funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and Manitoba's Department of Housing and Family Services, the Winnipeg-based Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS), researched visitability in Canada from August, 2006 to August, 2007.

OBJECTIVES

The study's objectives were:

- to analyze the progress and diffusion of visitability in Canada;
- to determine barriers and facilitators to its adoption in Canada;
- to determine best practices, gaps, trends and issues.

METHODOLOGY

The following activities were designed to achieve the study's objectives:

- A National Advisory Committee composed of a variety of stakeholders was established. This included people with connections to research and policy development and industry and community organizations involved in aging, disability, affordable housing and universal design.
- A Canadian and international environmental scan was undertaken to determine which provinces, cities and countries have visitability initiatives. These scans led to creating a database and network.
- The first Canadian visitability website was established (www.visitablehousingcanada.com).

Canada

CMHC SCHL
HOME TO CANADIANS

- The first North American visitability Think Tank was held in Winnipeg to discuss best practices, gaps, trends and issues. It included presentations and discussions and a tour of three visitable houses. The Think Tank brought together 57 key stakeholders, including seniors and disability organizations, policymakers, designers, homebuilders, community developers, real estate professionals, municipal officials, health care professionals and building code specialists.

  The keynote speakers were:

  - **Mayor Roger Claar of Bolingbrook, Ill,** who presented Bolingbrook's experience since 2003, when the city of 56,321 required all new homes to be visitable. By May, 2007, more than 3,000 visitable homes had been built.
  - **Eleanor Smith of Atlanta, founder of Concrete Change**[1] presented on the visitability movement in the United States, visitability ordinances in North America and on her work with the U.S. Green Building Council on the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) to obtain LEED points for visitable housing in neighbourhood design.

- The first Canadian online survey to determine facilitators, barriers and further determine best practices, trends and issues was conducted. Several methods were used to distribute the survey:
  - sending out invitations to targeted key stakeholder groups;
  - inviting participation at meetings attended by the research team and the Advisory Group;
  - sending the invitation to online discussion forums;
  - asking key groups to advertise the survey on their websites (four agreed: Canada's Association for the Fifty-Plus (CARP),[2] the Co-operative Housing Federation (CHF), the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) and the Manitoba Society of Occupational Therapists.);
  - linking to the survey on the CCDS website;
  - e-mailing information to the CCDS mailing list.

The survey goal was to understand the extent of Canadians' s to knowledge and opinions and to determine facilitators and barriers ion the adoption of visitable housing. The survey was also a continuat of the environmental scan, collecting information on initiatives in Canada, barriers and facilitators. It included 26 questions.

Information and findings from the project were disseminated in bility publications and at conferences, and a national network on visitab was established.

FINDINGS

Environmental Scan

The environmental scan showed that in 2006–07 there were mbia visitability initiatives in Manitoba, Ontario, Alberta, British Colu and Yukon. All were about public housing initiatives.

sing.

Manitoba was a leader, with a specific consultant on visitable hous ny Manitoba also had the most references to the term "visitable" in a any guidelines on accessibility. Even though Manitoba was ahead of m other provinces, it does not have requirements for visitability.

Canada is definitely moving forward with visitability initiatives as shown by the environmental scan, the on-line survey, the n participation and interest in the Think Tank and the interest show ts in the website. Canada is a leader with visitability technical statemen CSA-B651-04 Standard, which has contributed a great deal to the pted rapid increase in visitable housing, as many jurisdictions have ado the CSA-B651-04 visitability requirements. In most cases, the ng reference to these technical requirements is related to public housi and most often compliance is voluntary.

ion

The Department of National Defence/Canadian Forces Constructi Engineering Technical Order (CETO) 2005 is a global model. DND/CF is the only government organization in Canada that requires visitability in the built environment.

1 For information about Concrete Change, see http://www.concretechange.org/. English, retreived January, 2008.

2 Canada's Association for the Fifty-Plus was formerly known as the Canadian Association of Retired Persons– CARP. The name no longer describes the membership, which is 50 years old and older, retired and not retired.

GAPS/ISSUES

Major gaps/issues identified were:

- There is a lack of housing stock with basic access in Canada.
- In most cases people are forced to carry friends and relatives up entry stairs into their homes or have them not visit.
- There is a consumer demand: real estate professionals participating in the Think Tank said they have clients asking for at least basic access, which they cannot find.
- There are few visitability regulations in Canada; most are voluntary and all are for publicly funded housing. No bylaws or regulations for private housing were found.
- The aging population is growing and Canada needs to move forward immediately to meet future housing needs.
- The housing industry, planners and designers are not sufficiently aware of visitable housing.
- There is a need to address existing housing stock with more and better renovation funding programs for accessibility—a multi-pronged approach is needed.
- There is a lack of common visitability terminology.

TRENDS

- Europe, the U.S.A., Australia and the U.K. are moving forward in visitable housing.
- Canada is lagging behind other nations in terms of legislation, incentives and education about visitable housing.
- There appears to be growing interest in visitable housing in Canada.

BEST PRACTICES

One of the main best practice examples of visitability is the work in Bolingbrook. Since enacting a visitability ordinance in 2003 for all new housing, thousands of homes have been built with no complaints.

The CSA-B651-04 Standard and the DND/CF CETO are national best practices in Canada. Manitoba, through the initiatives of the government of Manitoba and City of Winnipeg , has developed best practices, as has Yukon through mortgage incentives linked to housing with visitability features.

Other important best practices were to:

- Link visitability with sustainability practices: LEED initiatives in the U.S.A. and development of communities in Canada are very promising;
- Link visitability with livable and age-friendly communities initiatives;
- Link visitability with the growing aging demographic;
- Show that visitability is a universal design approach: a good design practice for all people.

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS

The 189 responses to the online survey, the Think Tank and the networking helped identify barriers and facilitators to the adoption of visitability in Canada.

The main barriers include:

- Costs, affordability and buy- in—both real and perceived.
- Attitudinal barriers—by industry, professionals and individuals.

- Lack of education and marketing.
- Limited awareness and support by some governments.

The main facilitators to adopting visitability as a practice include:

- Working to change mindset/attitudes.
- Linking visitability with current planning objectives (smart growth, livability, inclusion).
- Continuing and expanding government incentive programs.
- Striving to increase public demand.
- Education and training of the public, professionals and national advocacy groups.
- Developing more tools and resources.
- Targeting and persuading key groups to adopt visitability.
- Researching the impacts of visitable homes.
- Adopting vistability through building code/legislation and regulation.
- Developing a networking mechanism.
- Creating a hub or coordination point for activities.
- Addressing existing housing stock as well as new housing stock by providing incentives for home renovation for accessibility.[3]

The ideas for facilitation formed the basis for a Framework for Action to move visitability forward. Think Tank participants agreed to move the agenda forward in small ways in their own areas. CCDS has obtained funding from the federal Office on Disability Issues (ODI) for a project regarding aging with a long-term disability where housing is one of the important components to be examined.

CAPACITY BUILDING OF CHANGE AGENTS IN CANADA

As a result of the project:

- Advisory Committee Members from Alberta, Nova Scotia and Ontario are bringing forward visitability in those provinces.
- Several people who attended the Think Tank or visited the website are moving the visitability agenda forward in their areas.
- The City of Winnipeg moved forward with a recommendation to council as a result of the Think Tank and a discussion between Winnipeg councillors and the mayor of Bolingbrook.
- An advisory committee member spoke about visitable housing at a conference on affordable housing.
- *Architects without Borders–Winnipeg* partnered with *Habitat for Humanity- Winnipeg* to design and build a visitable home with plans for more in the future.
- One Think Tank attendee is now working with a Manitoba home developer to build a visitable home development in rural Manitoba.
- The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists developed a webpage dedicated to Visitable housing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need for further research on visitable housing in Canada, including regular updates and data on visitable housing initiatives, for example, number of homes built; demographics and health outcomes of those living in visitable housing; injury statistics and cost-benefit analysis.

There is also a need for development of Canadian-specific marketing and educational materials and tools and courses as well as websites. As the study participants recommended, there is a need for a central hub to pull together all the information on what is happening in Canada and to facilitate a network where people can learn from each other. There is also a great need to establish mandatory policies on visitable housing in order to move the agenda forward.

3 CMHC's Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program for persons with disabilities, homeowners and landlords funds home renovation for accessibility.

CONCLUSION

This project promoted an understanding of visitability in Canada. The project produced the first Canadian website on visitable housing, the first Canadian survey on visitable housing and the first Canadian Think Tank on visitability. It linked visitable housing to livable communities and to sustainability concepts. It also helped begin to build capacity and resources about visitability for the first time in Canada. It provided a snapshot of Canadian and foreign initiatives that promote visitability.

A few policies on visitability have been established but very few homes have been built. All polices so far are related to publicly funded housing. There are several key individuals across the country who are working as advocates to move visitability forward.

Although indications are that Canada's efforts are lagging behind in comparison with the U.S.A., Great Britain and Australia, there is considerable energy for movement forward in this country.

The results of this pilot research will give governments, urban planners and policymakers greater knowledge of the importance and applicability of visitability in support of policy and program development.

CMHC Project Manager: Jim Zamprelli

CCDS Project co-leaders: Laurie Ringaert, Olga Krassioukova-Enns

Senior adviser: Eleanor Smith

Research assistant: Laura Rempel

This project was funded (or partially funded) by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) under the terms of the External Research Program (ERP), an annual research grant competition. The views expressed are the personal views of the author(s) and do not represent the official views of CMHC. For more information on the ERP, please visit the CMHC website at **www.cmhc.ca** or contact the Project Officer, Responsive Programs by e-mail at erp@cmhc-schl.gc.ca, or by regular mail: Project Officer, Responsive Programs, External Research Program, Policy and Research Division, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 700 Montreal Road, Ottawa ON K1A 0P7.

To find more ***Research Highlights*** plus a wide variety of information products, visit our website at

www.cmhc.ca

or contact:

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
700 Montreal Road
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P7

Phone: 1-800-668-2642
Fax: 1-800-245-9274

©2008, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
Printed in Canada
Produced by CMHC 08-07-08

Although this information product reflects housing experts' current knowledge, it is provided for general information purposes only. Any reliance or action taken based on the information, materials and techniques described are the responsibility of the user. Readers are advised to consult appropriate professional resources to determine what is safe and suitable in their particular case. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation assumes no responsibility for any consequence arising from use of the information, materials and techniques described.

65959